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# Counteracting Dynamics of Violent Communication in Bullying

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## Abstract

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## Author Bio(s)

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## **Counteracting Dynamics of Violent Communication in Bullying**

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### **Abstract**

This study examines fourteen conversations from observations conducted on bullying among 8th graders in 2002, in a Middle School in Virginia in the United States of America to: (1) identify power disparity in verbal bullying between bullies and targets, (2) examine how power disparity in verbal bullying empowers the perpetrator against silent targets, (3) explain how targets' verbal responses neutralize bullies or stop bullying, and (4) design an approach to counteracting verbal bullying –the “agere contra” approach to bullying, which demonstrates how words could also be used, not only to counteract bullying, but also to heal both the perpetrator and the target of bullying with the intervention of third parties. It was hypothesized that targets' response (silence or verbal reaction) to verbal bullying affects bullies' attitudes or decision to perpetuate or stop bullying cycle. The study used a mixed-method approach to perform conversation analysis, and semiotic analysis on the data collected. The results show support for the hypothesis. In light of the results, the study advocates for counteracting bullying by using the “agere contra” approach, which translates into a combination of the target's verbal response and the intervention of third parties, open anti-bullying teams guided by a school conflict resolution specialist.

### **Introduction**

Nowadays, the observer just needs to watch and read the news to admit that bullying is widespread in elementary, middle, and high schools in the United States. Media sources report abundant news on school bullying as recent and current events. Bullying represents an aggressive behavior pattern where a student (or a group of students in some cases) utilizes his/her physical, verbal, or material power to assault physically, verbally, or by gesture a weaker, smaller, or poorer student through the means of destructive enactments such intimidations, provocations, beating, undesirable touching or solicitations, insults, mocking, name-calling, or other behaviors of that kind (Olweus, 1993; Swearer, Espelage, & Napolitano, 2009; Winslade & Williams, 2012). As per this working definition, bullying can occur in the forms of physical or verbal violence. This article focuses mainly on verbal bullying because our observations show that it happens more frequently in our schools.

What are some indicators of violent communication in verbal bullying, and how do they create power disparity between bullies and targets? To what extent should targets respond, and how should bullying be addressed constructively and systemically? The present article answers those questions and suggests ways to counteract effectively and constructively the social problem bullying represents. The analyst could hypothesize that verbal response could contribute to ending the circle of verbal bullying. However, what if a verbal response does not work? What should be done to stop bullying? The article uses conversation analysis, and semiotic analysis to examine fourteen observations on bullying conducted in 2002 in a middle school in Virginia, and demonstrate how the combination of target's verbal response and third-party intervention is required to counteract verbal bullying successfully.

### **School Bullying as a Social Problem**

Studies by education services and scholars such as the Norwegian psychologist, Dan Olweus, have found that schools are plagued by the problem of bullying. Left unchecked, bullies are more likely than non-bullies to become offenders in the criminal justice system when they get older. Their victims are likely to suffer from severe problems of self-esteem and depression, impairing their ability to perform well in school and social life settings (Olweus, 1993; Swearer, Espelage, & Napolitano, 2009; Winslade & Williams, 2012). At the extreme, victims may commit suicide or develop violent strategies to rid themselves of those who bully them and to express their anger at those who ignored the bullying, as it apparently occurred with the young shooters of Columbine High School in 1999.

Across the United States of America, bullying in schools remains a major issue of concern due to the danger it represents for individual safety and public health. Statistics reveal that 15 to 25% of U.S. students are frequently bullied. Fifteen to twenty percent of students confess they often bully their peers (Nansel et al., 2001). "The U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences (IES) (2007) found a higher figure among students in the 12 to 18 age group: 32% were victims of bullying in previous school year" (Winslade & Williams, 2012, p. 122). Studies find that bullying negatively affects both the perpetrator and the victim with emotional issues or behavioral deficiency. Findings suggest that perpetrators of bullying are inclined to poor academic performance or drop-out of school, and are more likely to engage in antisocial behaviors, including carrying weapons to school (Berthold & Hoover, 2000; Nansel, Overpeck, Haynie, Ruan, & Schiedt, 2003; Nansel, Craig, Overpeck, Saluja, & Ruan, 2004; Sourander, Helstela, Helenius, & Piha, 2000). Moreover, scholars indicate that victims of bullying have an inclination to issues of self-esteem, anxiety,

and depression, suicidal thoughts and attempts, in addition to poor school performance (Bond, Carlin, Thomas, Ruin, & Patton, 2001; Eisenberg, Neumark-Sztainer, & Perry, 2003; Gladstone, Parker, & Malhi, 2006; Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Klomeck, Marrocco, Kleinman, Schonfeld, & Gould, 2007; Nansel et al., 2004; Sourander, Helstela, Helenius, & Piha, 2000; Winslade & Williams, 2012). Such emotional and behavioral dysfunctions in perpetrators and victims of bullying may ultimately result in long-term destructive and criminal behaviors in their adulthood (Nansel et al., 2001; Gladstone et al., 2006; Hugh-Jones & Smith, 1999; Olweus, 1993).

A number of scholars and practitioners have specifically associated bullying with suicidal thoughts or risks (for example, Kim, Koh, & Leventhal, 2005; Klomek et al., 2007; Klomek, Sourander, & Gould, 2010; Klomek, et al., 2011). In a cross-sectional study of 1718 seventh and eighth-grade students in two middle schools, Kim, Koh, and Leventhal (2005) compared students involved in bullying with those who were not involved in it, and found that victim-perpetrators reported more suicidal behaviors. As a result, they concluded that students who experienced school bullying, particularly victim-perpetrators, had significantly higher risks for suicidal thoughts and behaviors when compared with students who did not experience bullying (Kim et al., 2005). Klomek et al. (2007; 2010; 2011) reviewed a series of studies on bullying to examine the association between suicide and bullying in children and adolescents. They found that bullying and peer victimization foster suicidal thoughts with some variations by gender. Their conclusion enhanced a correlation between bullying and suicidality (Klomek et al., 2007). Such results echo what observers witness in the news. According to CBS News's Steve Hartman, "bullying that ends in suicide has become an all-too-familiar theme on the news" (Hartman, 2011). Cases of teenage students who committed suicide over the past ten years due to school bullying include 13-year-old Ryan Halligan of Vermont in 2003, 14-year-old Megan Meier of Missouri in 2006, 15-year-old Phoebe Nora Mary Prince of Massachusetts in 2010, 18-year-old Tyler Clementi of New Jersey in 2010, 14-year-old Jamey Rodemeyer of New York in 2011, 13-year-old Rachel Ehmke of Minnesota in 2012, and 17-year-old Jay Corey Jones of Minnesota in 2012, to mention a few names.

Even though the literature seems to emphasize the impact of bullying mainly on perpetrators and victims, evidence suggests that bullying also affects the third party that witnesses its occurrence. Bystanders often feel disturbed and even guilty for not helping the victim by confronting the perpetrator of bullying (O'Connell, Pepler, & Craig, 1999).

Because bullying affects not only the target, but also the bully, and their community, this article examines how the bystander's involvement in the form of a third-party intervention can be significant for power balance, and contribute to counteracting bullying effectively for the benefit of the school community.

The analyst would observe that research on bullying drastically increased since the 1990s, following Olweus's (1993) groundbreaking work on bullying. Much of the literature defines bullying as repeated physical or verbal aggressions perpetrated by one or more actors on a subject whom they perceive to be weaker than them (Olweus, 1993; Rivers & Smith, 1994; Bosworth, Espelage, & Simon, 1999; Baldry & Farrington, 2000; Nansel et al., 2001; Nansel et al., 2004; Winslade & Williams, 2012). Olweus's definition of bullying excludes situations involving actors of similar physical and psychological strength (Olweus, 1993; 1994), which implies that he observes some power imbalance in what he understands as bullying. Following Olweus' work, researchers have more assertively examined power disparities between bullies and their victims (Vaillancourt, Hymel, & McDougall, 2003; Winslade & Williams, 2012).

However, despite the surge in the literature on bullying, and the increase in scholars' interest in studying power difference in bullying, the focus has not been so much on power imbalance of communication in bullying, though researchers seem to agree that bullying involves not only physical attacks, but also verbal ones. Some scholars even find that the occurrence of verbal aggression is higher among girls than with boys (for example, Baldry & Farrington, 2000; Bosworth et al., 1999; Nansel et al., 2001; Rivers & Smith, 1994). Observations of bullying experiences in our school systems allow the analyst to scrutinize bullying more carefully through the lenses of power imbalance in violent communication, and beyond the gender spectrum. This article sets that as a goal, which frames its relevance. Indeed, violent communication in bullying often takes the forms of verbal attacks such as insults or curses, name-calling, and mockeries (any words or phrases with some potential of destruction or destructive impact on the victim) recorded in a face-to-face communication, or in a phone conversation. Violent communication in bullying can also be virtual (cyber-bullying), which occurs online through emails, text messages, on Facebook, using twitter, or other new technologies of communication. For its purposes, this study defines bullying as a violent conflict where a party A utilizes his or her physical, verbal, intellectual, or any other natural or personal power to oppress another party B perceived as weaker or disable. This definition of bullying falls in the perspective of conflict analysis and resolution, which

defines conflict as a manifestation of antagonism or contradiction between two parties (Wilmot & Hocker, 2001; Koko, 2008) or as an incompatibility of parties' aspirations (Pruitt & Kim, 2004). Once bullying is defined as a conflict, it appears that violent communication represents a harmful weapon that bullies use to hurt their targets.

Traditional approaches to addressing bullying include targets neglecting, minimizing, or ignoring the problem, targets fighting the bully back, or school officials taking punitive actions against the perpetrator of bullying, to mention a few approaches (Swearer et al., 2009; Winslade & Williams, 2012). In the perspective of conflict transformation, all such approaches present limitations which could be detrimental to the target, the bully, and their community. Winslade and Williams (2012) coherently highlight some of those limitations. It does not necessarily help when a target ignores bullying. "Perpetrators of bullying can easily see that their efforts are striking home, even on the person who tries to ignore it, and they are encouraged to keep on doing it" (Winslade & Williams, 2012, p. 126). A target that opts to fight back is either running the risk of embracing the logic of a bully, or increasing the chance of violence escalation (Winslade & Williams, 2012). Finally, punishment may not eventually address the roots of the problem; punishment falls in the win-lose logic of a power-based approach just like bullying, and fails to empower the victim and the bully for collaborative conflict transformation.

Going beyond such approaches, Olweus' groundbreaking work suggested that bullying should be handled more systemically through the means of class sessions and lessons, teacher awareness campaigns, playground supervision, and other school-wide programs to prevent, reduce or stop bullying (Olweus, 1993; 1994; Winslade & Williams, 2012). However, due to their official nature, some of these programs can still be trapped in the win-lose logic of power-based approach to problem solving, which takes the authority for resolving issues out of students' hands, and gives it to school officials. Winslade and Williams (2012) clearly understood this when they advocate for setting up undercover anti-bullying teams to integrate and empower students by making them responsible for addressing bullying. To some extent, this article builds on their approach by suggesting that overt anti-bullying teams capitalize on the target's verbal response to bullying.

By reading the observation sheets of field observations conducted on bullying in 2002 in a middle school in Virginia, the author hypothesizes that targets' response (silence or verbal reaction) to verbal bullying affects bullies' attitudes or decision to perpetuate or stop the bullying cycle. The objective of this article is fourfold: (1) identify power disparity in

verbal bullying between bullies and targets in terms of the gap between the words used by the bullies, and the targets' silent attitudes, (2) examine how power disparity in verbal bullying empowers the perpetrator against silent targets, by highlighting the hurtful power of words used in bullying, (3) explain how targets' verbal responses neutralize bullies or stop the bullying cycle, and (4) design an approach to counteracting verbal bullying –the “*agere contra*” approach to bullying to demonstrate how words could also be used, not only to counteract bullying, but also to heal both the perpetrator and the target of bullying with the intervention of third parties, fellow students, parents, school officials, or conflict resolution specialists. The overall goal is to counteract bullying in schools adequately.

### **Methodology**

This study mainly uses qualitative methods for data collection and analysis, building on data the author collected in 2002 with a colleague, Bonnie Lofton. Data collection procedures included participant observations. For data analysis this paper relies on techniques of conversation analysis, and semiotic analysis. The population targeted was the oldest children in a mid-sized middle school with a population of 750 students. The site was located in a small city of Virginia with a population of 23,000 people. Using purposeful sampling, and to keep the study manageable, the focus was limited to the top grade level (255 students in grade 8) of the three grades in the middle school. The school was the only public middle school in the city; therefore it embraces all the social-economic groups, races, and nationalities of the city. There were private schools available in the area, but they were smaller, drawing away only about one percent of the middle school population. Gaining entry to the school was relatively easy because my co-researcher, Bonnie Lofton, had contacts and vested interest in the quality of school environment, as a result of (1) having children in the school system, (2) being a substitute teacher in the school system, and (3) caring about the children in the community in which she lives. Lofton was known to school officials and trusted by them, making it possible to do research in the system with relative ease.

The cooperation of school authorities was required to conduct this research. Parents and students received permission slips through the students' home-base teachers. Informed consent forms were given out to 8th graders in the Middle School, to teachers at the school, and to parents of 8th graders. Finally, the school needed to make physical arrangements for this study, providing permission for the researchers to ride school buses, and to participate in students' activities in the classrooms, in the library, and in the cafeteria (during lunch).



Participant observations were conducted for two days in different school settings, including on the school bus, in the classroom, in the library, in the hallways, and in the cafeteria.

The observations took place on Thursday, February 28<sup>th</sup>, 2002, and on Friday, March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2002. Such observations were guided by the following research questions: How do students get picked on? How do they communicate with one another? What are students' conversations like, in general? How do students handle bullying? Is it common that certain students hang together? If so, could these groups be described with names? How do members of the groups relate to one another? For example, how do the athletes get along with the artsy students? Do some students get picked on more often than others? Why is it important to reduce bullying here? What are things that teachers or other adults do that make students' relationships better or worse?

For the purposes of this article, data collected through participant observations were chunked and coded with numbers and themes. In the context of this study, fourteen bullying situations were observed in the school over two days, on February 28, 2002, on and March 1, 2002. From the observations, there were eleven bullies (coded as Bully 1, Bully 2, Bully 3, Bully 4, Bully 5, Bully 6, Bully 7, Bully 8, Bully 9, Bully 10, Bully 11), and fourteen targets (coded as Target 1, Target 2, Target 3, Target 4, Target 5, Target 6, Target 7, Target 8, Target 9, Target 10, Target 11, Target 12, Target 13, and Target 14), with three targets (Target 1, Target 2, and Target 3) for Bully 1, and two targets (Target 5, and Target 6) for Bully 3. The study utilized techniques of conversation analysis, and semiotic analysis for data analysis, and the results were interpreted accordingly. Conversation analysis stands for "a meticulous analysis of the details of conversation, based on a complete transcript" (Babbie, 2004, p. 375). Semiotic analysis looks for "meanings intentionally or unintentionally attached to signs" (Babbie, 2004, p. 373). The unit of analysis in the study was conversation. All fourteen conversations observed were between students at the middle school. Every conversation observed among the student population on the school bus, in the school cafeteria, hallways, and library, was recorded in the form of written notes as presented in Table 1 and Table 2.

Eight out the fourteen bullying scenarios observed were verbal aggressions (they encompass the cases of *Bully 1*, *Bully 2*, *Bully 3*, *Bully 6*, *Bully 7*, and *Bully 8*), five were physical aggressions (which include *Bully 3*, *Bully 4*, *Bully 5*, *Bully 9*, and *Bully 11*), and only one was an imitation gesture for mocking a disable student (*Bully 10*). Though it takes into account the physical aggression scenarios observed, the conversation analysis here focuses specifically on verbal bullying, and the target's verbal response. In other words, the analysis

capitalizes on the interactions between *Bully 1* and *Target 1*, *Bully 1* and *Target 2*, *Bully 1* and *Target 3*, *Bully 2* and *Target 4*, *Bully 3* and *Target 6*, *Bully 6* and *Target 9*, *Bully 7* and *Target 10*, and *Bully 8* and *Target 11*. The study coded the manifest content (or concrete terms) of such conversations by identifying specific words that serve as indicators of violent communication on the part of the perpetrator (or bully in the context of this study) to determine how violent they are. Responses from the targets were organized into categories of counteractions (verbal or physical) and silence (absence of counteraction). Counteractions will be interpreted as filling the gap of power disparity by creating some power balance in conversations between bullies and targets (with positive incidence on discouraging bullying), whereas absence of counteractions will potentially equate with widening the gap of power imbalance with incidence on encouraging bullying, and with damaging implications in student conversations.

Table 1. *Observing Bullying (Day 1 Observation Sheet)*

<p>Table 1: <i>Observing Bullying (Day 1 Observation Sheet)</i></p> <p><b>Observing Bullying (Day 1 Observation Sheet) <u>On the school bus:</u></b></p> <p><i>'Your name is moron'</i>, says a tall boy (Bully 1) shouting at his short neighbor (Target 1) on the opposite seat. The victim looks at the perpetrator, then bends his head and remains silent; the bully goes on.</p> <p><i>'You are stupid'</i>, shouts the same schoolboy (Bully 1) at another student some minutes later. The victim (Target 2) remains silent, and the offender goes on.</p> <p>The same perpetrator (Bully 1) asks another student (Target 3): <i>why is your head so big, big head guy?</i> The target responds: <i>my Dad says it is because I am smart.</i> The harasser immediately refrains, opens his book, and starts reading quietly.</p> <p>Soon after, <i>'what are you writing?'</i> a boy (Bully 2) asks a girl (Target 4). <i>'I am writing my nickname'</i>, she responds. –<i>'What is it?'</i> he continued. <i>'Rubber'</i>, she says. <i>'That is a good nickname'</i>, he adds. Then the girl starts beating him. <i>'That is not abuse'</i>, he reacts. <i>'That is abuse'</i>, the girl replies. Then, the boy apologizes.</p> <p><b><u>In the school library:</u></b> A boy (Bully 3) keeps touching a girl's hair (Target 5). She reacts by beating him; he then stops. Later on, <i>'get your bottom off my face'</i>, says the same boy (Bully 3) to another girl (Target 6). The latter looks at him up and down, and hardly moves. The boy then moves away from the girl quickly.</p> <p><b><u>In the hallways:</u></b> A tall guy (Bully 4) keeps beating his small neighbor (Target 7). The latter asks him sadly <i>'why are you beating me?'</i> The persecutor responds, <i>'because I can'</i>. At this point, two other students notice the interaction, and ask the bully to stop, which he did and apologized to the target.</p> <p>Another boy (Bully 5) attempts to hug a girl (Target 8) from the back. She strictly resists by saying <i>'no'</i>. The boy suddenly backs up from his attempt, and run away.</p> <p><b><u>In the dining hall:</u></b> A student (Bully 6) calls his neighbor (Target 9), <i>'smoker'</i>. <i>'Don't laugh at me, I don't tolerate that'</i>, the victim responds. <i>'I am teasing you, sorry'</i> the perpetrator says.</p>	<p>FIELD RESEARCHER'S COMMENTS:</p> <p>The school bus, the school library and hallways, as well as the dining hall unfortunately become settings for bullying. Some students (apparently more powerful) use destructive words to offend others (less powerful).</p> <p>The bullies continue as long as they do not encounter resistance. Once there is verbal resistance they stop.</p>
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Table 2. *Observing Bullying (Day 2 Observation Sheet)*

<p><b>On the school bus:</b> A girl (Target 10) is talking and laughing. Suddenly, a guy (Bully 7) behind her interrupts ‘<i>shut up</i>’. She reacts ‘<i>I don’t shut up! That is one thing you have to learn from me</i>’. The boy looks down and moves away. Afterward, another girl (Bully 8) calls her neighbor (Target 11), ‘<i>little man</i>’. ‘<i>You call me little!</i>’ he exclaims, shaking his head in disagreement. As a result, another student witnessing the conversation tells the girl, “you should apologize”. She then apologizes.</p> <p><b>In the hallways:</b> A boy (Bully 9) holds his neighbor’s hair (Target 12). ‘<i>I don’t like that</i>’, she declares. ‘<i>I am just kidding</i>’, he said. ‘<i>You have to stop because I take it personal</i>’, she reacts. The boy stops.</p> <p>Another boy (Bully 10) starts limping in imitation of a handicap student (Target 13) walking ahead of him. The victim notices it, and turns around. The boy laughs and stops for a while. As the victim silently continues his way forward, the bully keeps limping after him.</p> <p><b>In the dining hall:</b> A group of students are sitting around a table. A boy (Bully 11) comes and starts pushing one (Target 14) of them. The victim asks ‘<i>why are you pushing me?</i>’ The bully responds ‘<i>you need to be where you are now; are you worthy to be where I am?</i>’ Then he laughs, clapping his hands. Other students witnessing the scene ask the victim to go complain. Then, the bully immediately starts walking away.</p>	<p><b>FIELD RESEARCHER'S COMMENTS:</b></p> <p>The dining hall unfortunately becomes a place of group distinction and exclusion! The hallways sadly become a setting for mocking a disable student.</p>
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### Some Indicators of Violent Communication

The observation sheets from the fourteen bullying scenarios show how bullies communicate to their targets in aggressive manners, often using offensive expressions or words that connote or denote violence. In the context of this study, such expressions include “*your name is moron*”, “*you are stupid*”, “*Rubber . . . that a good nickname*”, “*get your bottom off my face*”, “*shut up*”, “*little man*”, “*why is your head so big, big head guy?*” “*Are you worthy to be where I am?*” To some degree, these expressions are meant to insult, to intimidate, to mock, or to exclude their targets in a communication process. Indeed, the word “*moron*” literally indicates a mentally retarded individual, or a foolish person. The adjective “*stupid*” also has the same meaning. The bully uses them in an attempt to insult or denigrate his victims. In general, the word “*rubber*” is not commonly used as a name for individuals. Here, the bully intends to mock or laugh at the victim by implying that rubber is a good nickname. Such expressions as “*get your bottom off my face*” and “*shut up*” respectively

imply disdain and intimidation. The use of the expression “*little man*” reflects mockery or derision, which is also *Bully 1*’s intention when he asks *Target 3* this question: “*why is your head so big, big head guy?*” A certain propensity to exclusion or discrimination is probably what triggers *Bully 11* to challenge *Target 14* with the following question: “*are you worthy to be where I am?*” Due to their violent connotations such expressions all bear the potential of having negative or destructive impacts on their targets.

In every communication process, the words we use are powerful, and they affect both our internal and external environment significantly: they certainly affect the receiver of the message more so than the sender (Benveniste, 1973). Positive words or comments translating into messages of lauds or praises tend to affect their receivers positively by stimulating sentiments of satisfaction or happiness. However, negative words or comments echoed in insults, mockeries, intimidations, and discriminations tend to hurt or harm, or even kill their receivers by generating feelings of dissatisfaction and issues of self-esteem, depression, and possibly suicidal thoughts. Words not only stimulate positive or negative feelings, but they also enact or enable constructive or destructive behaviors or actions. Obviously, behaviors usually follow suit sentiments in any organic process of human interactions. In a process of verbal bullying, words can hurt or kill a target. Therefore, we ought to find systemic ways of counteracting bullying by unveiling how words can also heal. Words can certainly hurt and kill, but they can also heal and redeem human subjects.

### **Categories of Targets’ Responses: Counteraction or Silence and Implications**

The observations conducted in the school reveal two categories of targets’ responses. Some targets actively respond to bullies by countering bullying verbally or physically. Other targets are passive and choose to oppose silence to the abuse. Out of the fourteen bullying situations observed over two days, eleven of the targets successfully counteracted bullying either verbally or physically, or both verbally and physically: eight targets confronted their bullies verbally (including *Target 3* versus *Bully 1*, *Target 7* versus *Bully 4*, *Target 8* versus *Bully 5*, *Target 9* versus *Bully 6*, *Target 10* versus *Bully 7*, *Target 11* versus *Bully 8*, *Target 12* versus *Bully 9*, and *Target 14* versus *Bully 11*), one target defeated the bully both verbally and physically (*Target 4* versus *Bully 2*), one target challenged the bully physically by beating him (*Target 5* versus *Bully 3*), and one target stopped the bullying by using body language through disdainful eye contacts (*Target 6* versus *Bully 3*). The other three targets remained silent in the face of attacks (*Target 1* versus *Bully 1*, *Target 2* versus *Bully 1*, and *Target 13* versus *Bully 10*).

On one hand, all the targets who actively responded to their bullies ended up discouraging or stopping the bullying cycle, according to the observations sheets. Out of the eleven targets that confronted their bullies, seven (including *Target 4*, *Target 5*, *Target 6*, *Target 8*, *Target 9*, *Target 10*, and *Target 12*) were able to successfully discourage or stop the bullying ipso facto, without the assistance of a third-party intervention, and four (*Target 3*, *Target 7*, *Target 11*, and *Target 14*) succeeded in ending the aggression with some sort of assistance from a third-party. In an attempt to respond to *Bully 1*'s inquiry about why his head was so big, *Target 3* replied: *my Dad says it is because I am smart*. This reaction implies that having a big head is nothing to be embarrassed about or ashamed of; instead it is an indication of being intelligent or bright. In other words, what the bully thought was a weakness for the target was turned into a powerful asset by the target's response. Such a response empowered the target and disarmed the bully; it counteracted the perpetrator's inclination to bullying with a sudden change in his attitude and behavior: he immediately refrained, opened his book, and started reading quietly. When *Bully 3* summoned *Target 6*: '*get your bottom off my face*', *Target 6* responded with an aggressive look at him up and down, and barely moved. As a result, *Bully 3* quietly moved away from her. When *Bully 6* called *Target 9*, '*smoker*', the latter reacted: '*don't laugh at me, I don't tolerate that*', which triggered the aggressor to say: '*sorry*'. Moreover, as *Bully 7* shouted at *Target 10* to shut her up, the latter replied: '*I don't shut up! That is one thing you have to learn from me*'. To such a response the attacker looked down and moved away. Finally, when *Bully 8* referred to *Target 11* as a '*little man*', the latter responded in disagreement, which made him get an apology from the perpetrator.

On the other hand, with silent targets the bullies either renewed attacks on the same subjects, or made other victims according to participant observations at the middle school. Opposing silence to bullying seems to be interpreted by the tormentor either as an indicator of acceptance on the part of the target of the attacks, or as a sign of weakness on the part of the target, which gives the former a sense of having some superior power over the latter. Either way, the results show that the target's silence to aggressions seems to encourage the aggressor to perpetrate further attacks. For instance, when *Bully 1* called him '*moron*', *Target 1* remained silent, which enabled the bullying cycle to continue, with *Bully 1* treating *Target 2* as stupid. As *Target 2* also remained silent to the insult, the oppressor perpetuated the bullying cycle to hit *Target 3* with this mocking question: *why is your head so big, big head guy?* To which *Target 3* stepped up to respond: *My Dad says it is because I am smart*. *Target*

3's verbal reaction stopped the bullying cycle as *Bully 1* immediately refrained from further bullying, opened up his book, and started reading silently. Additionally, *Target 13*'s silence in the face of *Bully 10*'s attack empowered the latter to keep the bullying cycle unfolding according to the observations.

### **Roles of Third-Party Bystanders**

Our observations confirmed that third-party interventions can play important roles in ending a bullying cycle. According to the observation sheets, third-party interventions contributed to stopping the bullying cycle in four cases out of the eight scenarios where targets confronted the bullying verbally. The four cases include *Target 3* versus *Bully 1*, *Target 7* versus *Bully 4*, *Target 11* versus *Bully 8*, and *Target 14* versus *Bully 11*. In the case of *Target 3* versus *Bully 1*, *Target 3*'s father stepped in as a third-party whose intervention came in the form of an advice that ultimately empowered *Target 3*: your head is big because you are smart. Regarding the situation of *Target 7* versus *Bully 4*, the third-party intervention was done by two bystanders who noticed the interaction after *Target 7*'s reaction, and asked the oppressor to stop, which he did and apologized to the target. As far as the scenario of *Target 11* versus *Bully 8* is concerned, the third-party intervention was that of another bystander who requested that *Bully 8* should apologize to *Target 11*, which he did. Finally, in the case of *Target 14* versus *Bully 11*, the third-party intervention occurred when a group of students witnessing the scene advised *Target 14* to go complain to the school officials about the mistreatment.

It is important to notice that in all four cases here, the third-party interventions follow the targets' verbal reactions to bullying. In other words, the analyst could say that by verbally engaging their bullies, targets catch outsiders' attention to witness what is happening in their immediate social environment, and to intervene as a result.

### **Interpretation of Results**

The results of our analysis confirm the hypothesis that targets' response (silence or verbal reaction) to verbal bullying affects bullies' attitudes or decision to perpetuate or stop bullying cycle. Targets' verbal response to attacks contributes to ending bullying cycle to some extent. According to our observations in this middle school, all eight targets that verbally counteracted their bullies were able to stop the bullying cycle either with or without a third-party assistance: four targets (including *Target 8* versus *Bully 5*, *Target 9* versus *Bully 6*, *Target 10* versus *Bully 7*, and *Target 12* versus *Bully 9*) ended the bullying without the intervention of a third party, and four targets got some form of third-party assistance

(including *Target 3* versus *Bully 1*, *Target 7* versus *Bully 4*, *Target 11* versus *Bully 8*, and *Target 14* versus *Bully 11*). Such results call for some discussions.

Some hermeneutics of the case of *Target 3* versus *Bully 1* would reveal that *Target 3* reported to his father how his schoolmates were mocking the size of his head, and how the father advised him to respond by constructively transforming his perception of the size of his head, and by ultimately empowering him over his bullies. As *Target 3* followed his father's advice, *Bully 1* stopped calling him name, and he certainly felt empowered as a result. It is as if his father's words exerted some healing power on *Target 3*. Words can certainly hurt when they are destructive as bullies' words do, but they can also heal when they become constructive as they did in *Target 3*'s case. The lesson we learn from this scenario triggers a recommendation to parents and school officials to dedicate more time to listening to their children and students, and to find creative ways of preemptively or proactively empowering them against bullies. Based upon their responses, the analyst can conclude that such targets with a strong character from the participant observations include *Target 9* and *Target 10*: remember that when *Bully 6* called *Target 9*, 'smoker', the latter reacted sharply: 'don't laugh at me, I don't tolerate that', which triggered the aggressor to say: 'sorry'. Likewise, as *Bully 7* shouted at *Target 10* to shut her up, she replied: 'I don't shut up! That is one thing you have to learn from me'. Not everybody has such a strong personality; yet, what if it could be acquired through training or socialization processes in a society where bullying has unfortunately become a virus?

It is of paramount importance that parents or educators assist in strengthening their students' character or personality positively. Parents or educators can do so by providing students with empowering or positive auto-suggestions or advice that help them believe in their capacities and transform what could be seen as their weakness into their strength as in the case of *Target 3*. Suicide and the worst case scenario could be avoided if parents and educators assist students in taking serious actions against bullying. Fortunately, the media presented some success stories in that regard. On Tuesday, February 7<sup>th</sup>, 2011, CBS news reported a very moving case of a male victim of bullying at the American Heritage Academy outside Atlanta. The 11-year-old boy who suffered from juvenile arthritis was taunted by his classmates over medical ailment; they mocked his limp and called him "chicken legs and other funny names" because of the way he walked (Hartman, 2011). He was excluded and rejected by the popular kids in the school. He was inflicted much physical and emotional pain, and considered killing himself. After they became aware of the problem, his parents,



teachers, and a classmate took actions to help the young boy redeem his image, which prevented him from committing suicide: they took time to listen to him share his nightmare of experience; they moved on to seeking counseling for him; they worked to integrate him in a youth group at church; they made sure he became the manager of the school cross country team with the help of a classmate. Such strategic decisions and actions contributed to helping the teenage student survive bullying, and he was excited to share his story with CBS news at the age of 13 (Hartman, 2011). Achieving success in that process requires a climate of trust where students can open up to their parents and school officials, and the latter devote enough time to listen to their students' concerns, or seek to inquire about their adventures at school.

The results of our analysis show that in some cases targets' verbal response alone is not sufficient to discourage the bully or end the bullying cycle. Some targets need the assistance of a third-party intervention to overcome the bully as in the cases of *Target 3* versus *Bully 1*, *Target 7* versus *Bully 4*, *Target 11* versus *Bully 8*, and *Target 14* versus *Bully 11*. Nonetheless, the reader ought to notice that such targets still took the initiative to attract the third-party's attention to their situation by responding to the bully verbally or by exposing their situation to an outsider. This means that where the target's words are still weak or ignored by the bully, the former should resort to the assistance of a third-party. Indeed, some bullies will reject or counteract their targets' response to further victimize them; there should not be any doubt about that. Some victims' "response to bullying can become the target of more teasing" (Winslade & Williams, 2012, p. 124). When such scenarios occur, the target ought to seek help from bystanders or an outside third party that could be a fellow student, a teacher, a school official, or a parent.

### **Implications and Final Recommendations: The Agere Contra Approach to Bullying**

In its literal meaning, "*agere contra*" is the Latin expression for 'act against'. This approach is inspired by the Jesuit Spirituality where the principle of *agere contra* requires that the subject finds creative ways to counteract or reject bad thoughts, or bad behaviors. The Jesuit principle of "*agere contra*" entails that "a soul that wishes to make progress in the spiritual life must always act in a manner contrary to that of the enemy" (Loyola, 2000, p. 124). Such a principle is operationalized in two basic rules for the discernment of spirits according to St. Ignatius of Loyola (2000), rules 325.12 and 326.13. Rule 325.12 states that:

The enemy becomes weak, loses courage, and turns to flight . . . as soon as one leading a spiritual life faces his temptations boldly, and does exactly the opposite of what he suggests. However, if one begins to be afraid and to lose courage in

temptations, no wild animal on earth can be fiercer than the enemy of our human nature. He will carry out his perverse intentions with consummate malice. (p. 118)

Article 326.13 stipulates:

When the enemy of our human nature tempts a just soul with his wiles . . . he earnestly desires that they be received secretly and kept secret. But if one manifests them to a confessor, or to some other spiritual person who understand his deceits and malicious designs, the evil one is very much vexed. For he knows that he cannot succeed in his evil undertaking, once his evident deceits have been revealed. (p. 118)

These two rules present ways in which human nature ought to take actions to counter the evil spirit's attacks in a spiritual process. Rule 325.12 suggests that the target of attacks fearlessly and harshly faces such attacks by opposing the enemy's inclinations or traps. Doing so weakens and discourages the enemy, and ultimately causes him/her to flee. If the target fails to do so due to a lack of courage or due to fears of the enemy, the latter becomes more stubborn and more powerful in renewing his/her attacks. Apparently, this rule implies that the target takes action personally, without the intervention of a third party. However, rule 326.13 requires that the target seeks the assistance of a third party by unveiling the attacks to a spiritual director. As a result, the two rules are complementary: if a target is not able to implement rule 325.12 (or if s/he fails to succeed in its implementation) for whatever reasons, s/he should resort to rule 326.13. The two rules are not mutually exclusive; a target can use them either alternatively or simultaneously. In other words, the target can select to take action personally and still unveil the situation to the attention of a third party for help.

The present study uses such rules by analogy in an attempt to design a model for counteracting verbal bullying. Bullying is here compared to what St. Ignatius of Loyola (2000) called the "enemy". Bullying—and not the bully—is the enemy because the bully is also a victim of the evil spirit that bullying reflects. It is essential to differentiate between bullying and the bully. Bullying is bad; it is the problem and not the bully (Winslade & Williams, 2012). Actually, Winslade and Williams (2012) further explain what we mean here:

Every person involved in the bullying relationship is also capable of other styles of relationship. No one is a bully or a victim by nature. The bully, the victim, and the bystander are names, not so much of persons as of positions in a narrative. People enter these positions and perform their narrative function, but they can also set the

story aside, given an effective invitation to do so. The challenge is to create an opportunity for each of them to step out of the story of bullying and into another storyline that is incompatible with ongoing bullying. (p. 128)

As a human being, the bully is a person who has the potential of transformation for good behaviors. To some degree, bullies' bad behaviors could be attributed to bad upbringing or social exposures, negative peer pressures, or related issues of unsafe environments they have experienced. This perspective on bullying reflects the view of the French philosopher, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, (1964) on society when he suggests that human beings are good by nature; it is society that corrupts them. Thus, a good socialization or education process could help bullies overcome bullying behaviors. In other words, the bullies also need help to learn good behaviors, such as loving and respecting those who are different from them. The fact that the observation sheets show some bullies apologizing to their targets enhances the importance of distinguishing the bullying behavior from the person of the bully. Indeed, over the fourteen bullying cases covered in this study, four bullies ended up apologizing to their targets: these include Bully 2 to Target 4, Bully 4 to Target 7, Bully 6 to Target 9, and Bully 8 to Target 11. If they are able to apologize, it means they recognize their wrongdoing somehow, and they just need help to anticipate and avoid bullying and learn good behaviors. Ultimately, if it is a fact that bullies use their physical, verbal, intellectual, material, or psychological power to hurt those who are weaker or smaller than them, it is certainly possible to teach them to use such powers to serve, help, and love their social environment. Parents and educators should spend more time teaching students to show respect to one another, and to be acceptant of their differences.

The *agere contra* approach to bullying encourages the target to first respond verbally to bullying, and then bring the issue to the attention of a third party for assistance (see Table 3). The first response is likely to empower the target mentally, as s/he bravely confronts the attacks with the power of words or phrases such as "*don't laugh at me, I don't tolerate that*", "*I don't shut up! That is one thing you have to learn from me*", all phrases used by *Target 9* and *Target 10* as observed in this middle school. The list of catchwords for verbally counteracting bullying could include other catchphrases such as 'I demand that you stop', 'I do not like it', 'you can behave better than that', or any creative verbal motto such as the one by *Target 3* in response to *Bully 1*'s injunction: "*my Dad says it is because I am smart*". The target's verbal response and subsequent empowerment may contribute to discouraging, disarming, slowing, or stopping the bullying cycle as in the case of *Target 9* versus *Bully 6*,

and *Target 10* versus *Bully 7*. However, regardless of the outcome of the target's verbal response, the *agere contra* approach would require that the target takes one additional step by bringing the situation to the attention of a third party that is able to assist in addressing the issue more broadly and effectively. Because of the danger bullying presents to individual and public health, it is therapeutic and safe for both the target and the bully, as well as for their school community that a third party comes in to address the bullying situation thoroughly in a bigger picture. A third-party intervention would certainly assist in transforming their relationship constructively and help the subjects grow. This second action is in reference to the rule 326.13 (Loyola, 2000) mentioned previously, which requires the target to unveil the attacks to a spiritual director that should be a conflict resolution specialist.

Table 3. *Agere Contra Approach to Bullying*

<b>Bullying Attacks</b>	<b>Target's Response: <i>Agere Contra</i> Approach to Bullying</b>	
<i>Verbal Attacks</i>	<i>(1) Verbal Reaction</i> [followed by(2)]	<i>(2) Bring Issue to Attention of Third-Party</i> (a conflict resolution specialist intervenes with open anti-bullying teams made up of students)

Specifics of a third-party intervention in school bullying presuppose the services of a conflict resolution specialist working for or within the school. It is critical to emphasize here the importance for each school to have a conflict resolution specialist because their education and training in conflict resolution predispose them to efficiently assist students in handling bullying which is here perceived a destructive conflict pattern within the school system. Their skills in intervention allow them to isolate the issues from the persons in order to tackle the destructive issues and help the persons constructively. As a result, they will be able to help targets, bullies, and their communities by tackling bullying accordingly. If each school can afford a school nurse or counselor, they should also bring on board a conflict resolution specialist in order to successful address the virus of bullying within school communities. Considering the negative impacts of bullying on our school communities, having a conflict resolution specialist working in the school compound is now as vital as having a school nurse.

To counteract verbal bullying, using the *agere contra* approach, the school conflict resolution specialist ought to reflectively and respectively listen to bullying targets, and

subsequently set-up peer anti-bullying teams to carefully and methodically counteract bullying within the school community. To some extent, this perspective relies on the “undercover anti-bullying teams” approach suggested by Winslade and Williams (2012, p. 127). According to Winslade and Williams:

Establishing undercover anti-bullying teams is an example of a practice that breaks new ground for counselors and employs their professional skills in a way that addresses behavior problems and transforms relationships, without resorting to an authoritarian approach. It can reduce bullying in a school to the benefit of students’ learning, teachers’ classroom management, and administrators’ workloads. (pp. 127-128)

Unlike scholars that advocate for undercover anti-bullying teams (Winslade & Williams, 2012), the present study suggests that such anti-bullying teams should not be undercover, but open. Indeed, open anti-bullying teams within schools are more likely to exert a positive peer pressure that generates a more systemic movement for counteracting bullying on a larger scope than the environment of a single school. Open anti-bullying teams could follow the pattern or trend of a regular student association or movement that publicly and instrumentally stands against bullying. Such teams should be exclusively made up of students to emphasize their orientation to peer-intervention, and to avoid the punitive message that the presence of a school authority might insinuate. Inspired by Winslade and Williams’s (2012) perspective on undercover anti-bullying teams, the open anti-bullying teams should also include a couple of students who perpetrate bullying; however such students should be outnumbered by students who do not bully. By integrating students who do bullying in the anti-bullying teams, the *agere contra* approach intends to embrace a transformative approach to bullying, which distinguishes the problem from the person creating the problem, herein, the bullying from the person committing bullying. Their integration into the teams also grants the bullies an opportunity to be exposed to, and learn good behaviors from their other teammates, by understanding bullying as a bad behavior, and ultimately fight against it. To be more specific, an open anti-bullying team should be made of eight members, including four females and four males for a gender balance. The eight members will include six students who are good role-models, and two students who do bullying. The set-up of the peer anti-bullying team should be designed by the school conflict resolution specialist in collaboration with the bullying target in order to allow the target to take responsibility for resolution and experience empowerment and healing. The conflict

resolution specialist does not act as an authority that decides what to do on behalf of the teams, but he or she plays the facilitative role of a transformative mediator who empowers the parties to recognize one another and to dynamically take control of the process and outcome of problem-solving.

The open anti-bullying team will take on the mission to monitor bullying activities around the identified target in the school environment, and to decisively stand to protect, defend, and empower the target verbally and morally in every situation where verbal bullying occurs. In addition, the anti-bullying team members should be trained to intervene as peer mediators between the bully and the target. Peer mediation is a process of mediation in which students serve as mediators to help their fellows in conflict solve their problem collaboratively by exploring issues systematically (Burrell, Zirbel, & Allen, 2003; Schrumpf, Crawford, & Bodine, 1997). Peer mediation sessions will be used for the parties to experience the healing power of words. In such sessions, the victim should be allowed to express their frustrations to the perpetrator of bullying. The latter should be given the opportunity to listen to the victim, to express remorse, and apologize to the victim with healing phrases such as “I am sorry”, “I regret I did this to you”, “I feel bad I hurt you”. Peer mediation can ultimately help empower the victim and inject a culture of healing in the school environment. Furthermore, the anti-bullying team should organize weekly anti-bullying events or forums that are open to the entire school community. Such events will serve as the venue to send clear messages against bullying through the means of student presentations, flyers, or posters. They will also be the place to recognize the anti-bullying team members by presenting them with incentives and rewards for hardworking. Such activities should creatively aim at providing bullies, victims, and their communities with an opportunity for change, growth, and healing. Success will be measured by the target’s report on the reduction or end of bullying assaults s/he experiences, along with his/her expression of satisfaction with the involvement of his/her anti-bullying team. This implies that the conflict resolution specialist consults daily or weekly (depending on the criticality of the case and on the workload) with the team and the target on their achievements and progress. Such moments of consultations could serve as a forum for providing advice and guidance for success. In other words, the consultative forum in the process provides an opportunity for a formative evaluation.

Upon the target’s request, and following his/her expression of satisfaction with the anti-bullying team’s performance, there will be a summative evaluation of the team’s

involvement in relation to the target's satisfaction. The summative evaluation will ask the target a mixture of quantitative and qualitative questions such as the following: Did you like the process? What did you like most in the team's involvement? How do you feel now? Do you feel better? Do you think the team has helped stop the bullying circle? Do you like the team's involvement? What would you recommend for improvement in how the team operates? Would you recommend the team to any other target? Members of the team will also be asked more or less similar questions such as: What do you think of the team's performance? Were you happy to be a part of the team? Do you like working with the team? Do you want to continue being part of this team? How do you see the team's involvement? What would recommend for improvement?

### **Conclusion**

This study examined fourteen conversations from observations conducted on bullying in 2002, in a Middle School in Virginia to: (1) identify power disparity in verbal bullying between bullies and targets in terms of the gap between the words used by bullies and the targets' silent attitudes, (2) examine how power disparity in verbal bullying empowers the perpetrator against silent targets, by highlighting the hurtful power of words in bullying, (3) explain how targets' verbal responses neutralize bullies or stop bullying, and (4) design the "*agere contra*" approach to counteracting bullying, which demonstrates how words could also be used to heal both the perpetrator and the target of bullying with the intervention of third parties.

Conversation analysis and semiotic analysis of the data translated into results that show that the target's verbal response as well as a third-party intervention is required to counteract verbal bullying successfully. The study designs and highly recommends the use of the *agere contra* approach to bullying, which integrates both target's response and third-party intervention to counteract verbal bullying. The *agere contra* approach will recommend every school to have a conflict resolution specialist whose role will be to (1) coach or teach victims of bullying to find creative ways to respond verbally to the perpetrators, and (2) create open peer anti-bullying teams made of bullies and non-bullies for intervening against bullying, and performing peer mediation activities. The notion of peer anti-bullying teams is inspired by Winslade and Williams's (2012) practice of undercover anti-bullying teams. However, this study recommends that such teams are not undercover because they may have a greater impact if they are overt.

The implication of this study for policymaking is straightforward. Policymakers and school officials could find useful tools in the open anti-bullying teams to successfully counteract bullying on a large scale in their school environment. The study also has interesting implications for research in the way it uses conversation analysis, and semiotic analysis to examine a phenomenon such as school bullying. More research ought to be done on bullying by using methods that analyze what is said and done by individual bullies.

This study presents some limitations. Its first limitation emerges from the fact that all fourteen observations were limited to the environment of only one school. Spreading observations on a larger scope, beyond the perimeter of a single school, to encompass many more schools would provide more meaningful results for policymaking. Implicit to this limitation is the small number of observations conducted in this study: analysts could reasonably argue that fourteen observations are not sufficient to make a strong case against bullying. The second limitation of this study is in the time period of the observations which covered only two days, with cross-sectional data collection. The dynamic of data collection and analysis would be different with more reliable results if data collection was longitudinal over a longer time-period. The third limitation is reflected by the single method used for data collection: using additional techniques such as open-ended interviews and surveys would have contributed to enrich the data, and ultimately increased the quality of the results. Another limitation comes from the possibility that the target's verbal response would even further the bullying cycle as some bullies may challenge the target's response with increased or additional attacks, and escalation of violence. Finally, the use of more rigorous methods that go beyond conversation analysis and semiotic analysis would foster broader results that can be used for policymaking on a wider scale.

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